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ABSTRACT

At Bowling Green State University (Ohio), a training program to prepare and develop teaching assistants to handle the basic communication course has been in effect for five years, and has resulted in strong basic course evaluations and effective teaching on the part of the graduate teaching assistants. The preparation begins , in midsummer, when the prospective teachers are sent handouts and teaching materials for the course. It continues, just prior to the beginning of fall term, with a university-wide "professional development program" and a more specific departmental training session that provides experiences in the speech activities the +eaching assistants will soon direct. Other parts of the +raining program continue through the school year, including weekly staff, meetings (to discuss grading procedures, effective teaching techniques, and other concerns), class visitations by the "t.a." director, required participation in a one-credit teacher education course, and optional enrollment in a four-credit course about teaching interpersonal and public communication. The rationale for such a multi-faceted approach to preparing teaching assistants is to offer a subtle combination of structure and flexibility; the program's design gives direction to the t.a.'s but on a wide path that yields consistent experiences to the group without constricting the individual. (RL)

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TRAINING TEACHING ASSISTANTS TO TEACH

THE BASIC-COMMUNICATION COURSE

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Richard L. Weaver, HI

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TRAINING TEACHING ASSISTANTS TO TEACH THE BASIC-COMMUNICATION COURSE

Graduate teaching assistants often enter a school or department directly after completing their undergraduate degree. Their background in the field is often meager and, by comparison, diverse. In some programs, students with a theatre, radio-television-film, communication disorders, or communication course, a course that may have little, if any, relationship with their undergraduate training. The general goal of the basic-course director, is to produce interested, competent, highly-motivated teachers. The specific goal is to quickly and efficiently prepare these students to teach the basic course.

Obviously, a key in this procedure is to remember that the graduate students primary goal is to get a degree; thus, demands upon them must not be excessive—that is, they must not conflict with their primary role. The way this blend is effected and supported is important. Achieving this blend is the focus of this article.

Speech communication. Also, there have been a plethora of articles on graduate teacher training in other disciplines. Many authors suggest specialized courses or sessions for preparation. Some promote weekly staff meetings or discussion periods or workshops. In this article, a multi-faceted training program is described that includes many of the above elements. The program has been in use for five years and has resulted in strong basic-course evaluations and effective teaching on the part of the graduate teaching assistants. Graduate students have also expressed positive reactions to the program.

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The overall goal of the training program is to offer structure, yet flexibility and direction, yet freedom. Although seemingly contradictory, we want to give our instructors as much latitude as possible, and yet we want students in the various sections of the course to have consistent experiences. There are some major reasons why graduate students often do not receive enough structure or direction. These reasons seem to be rooted in attitudes and feelings expressed by teachers or by basic-course directors who are responsible for teacher training in their courses:

- 1. No one likes to be told what to do; thus, we do not like to tell others what to do.
- 2. Who says our approach or method is right? Since we not only know that what we have to offer may not be correct but that there are many other alternative methodologies, we choose not to offer graduates any options.
- Because many teachers received no structure or direction in their own development—and they got where they are—they feel graduate students should begin the same way. We often tend to perpetuate our own experiences.
- 4. Some teachers have the philosophy that the best way to grow and develop is through experiencing the freedom to explore fully and freely.

 Restrictions of any kind undermine this foundation.
- 5. There is the feeling, too, that through structure, direction, and control we stifle creativity. Suggested ideas, approaches, exercises, and activities place inhibiting blinders on the recipient.
- 6. By staying out of the graduate student's way, we uphold academic freedom. No one in academe has the right to infringe on another's academic freedom.

There are, to be sure, other reasons why graduate students receive little or no training in teaching. Some have to do with many wer shortages, some with

economics, some with lack of interest. All, however, have the same outcome.

We "certify" college teachers—through the conference of degrees—who have

little or no training in teaching. We may, in fact, produce teachers who can
not teach, who then assume positions where they are supposed to (or are required

to) teach others to teach, and the cycle of ineffectiveness and ineptness can

be perpetuated.

At Bowling Green State University, most of those who teach in the basic course lack any prior teaching experience. They come from diverse undergraduate experiences. Because they are graduate students first, we attempt to protect their time by structuring and directing their teaching. We assume that our approach to the basic course not only works but that it is the best experience we can offer our undergraduates. The basic course is a hybrid approach composed of interpersonal, small-group, and public-communication experiences, Our assumption, too, is that graduate-student exposure to each of these areas will help them in their search for a job; many will be asked to teach courses, in one of these three areas. We feel, too, that we do not stifle creativity. The creative person is not restricted by structure and direction. Rather, the creative person is likely to be creative despite the situation; the more he or she has to work with, the more creative he or she can be / We; as teachers, must assume the responsibility for training other teachers. How can the weak, ineffective, and unqualified either be trained or eliminated? There are some students who should not be allowed to teach. Someone must discriminate; someone must judge. Finally, we feel that sharing our knowledge and experience with others is a joy -- a pleasure. It should be. Those who experience this joy and pleasure are likely to be more effective in training others.

We begin our training program before the fall quarter theging. It is, essentially, a five or six-pronged approach. It involves getting the materials

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into the hands of graduate students in about mid summer, training sessions prior to the beginning of fall teaching, weekly staff meetings once the quarter begins, in-class visitations by the director, the enrollment in one hour of pedagogy credit for which an assignment is completed, and a final optional prong for those very serious about teaching interpersonal or public communication: enrollment in a four-credit course titled "Teaching Interpersonal and Public Communication." Each prong will be discussed briefly.

Additional suggestions, or options, are offered as appropriate in the discussion.

The first prong involves getting the textbooks and materials to the incoming teaching assistant (T.A.). Because the basic course at Bowling Green is offered for four credits, we expect students to engage in much reading and assignment preparation. Our expectations are high. The biggest difficulty we face in this regard is the attitude by some undergraduates that speech communication is a lightweight subject and should not require as much time and effort as other heavyweight subjects such as chemistry or math. In the course, we require a basic textbook, an accompanying reader, and a student manual that integrates these for the student and provides the syllabus, specific assignments, critique sheets, and course-evaluation forms. These are sent to the T.A. during the summer prior to whem his or her assistantship begins. In addition, we send a teacher's manual.

of all the material we send, the teacher's manual has become the most essential. Here is where the director can be direct and personal. Here, too, is where freedom, flexibility, and spontaneity can be discussed. The teacher's manual is only 53 pages in length; the first 19 pages treat major aspects of teaching such as attendance, grading, evaluation, make-up policies, tests, conferences, and academic honesty. This section is prefaced by a "Director's

Manifesto" that not only lays out the nature of the course, the expectations of the director for teaching assistants, some of the material instructors must plan to prepare (in advance) for presentation in the course, but, too, the major concerns of the director, such as the necessity for:

- 1. meeting all classes
- 2. following the course syllabus
- 3. being prepared for classes
 - a. having material on hand to fill the required time
 - b. having additional material to fill unexpected times when exercises, speeches, or lectures run short
- 4. showing concern for the students
 - a. establishing and holding office hours
 - b. giving advice and assistance
 - c. efficiently marking, correcting, and returning student assignments
- 5. supporting the basic-communication program
- .6. attending all lectures and staff meetings

Perhaps the most valuable part of the teacher's manual, once T.A.'s are ready to begin teaching, is a 34-page section titled "Meeting Reminders." It is a day-by-day instructional guide designed with several purposes in mind:

- 1. It alerts teachers to forthcoming assignments.
- 2. It covers the material that should be considered or discussed during each class session.
- 3. It provides examples of questions that can be used for processing exercises, activities, and assignments.

Based on visitations, it is clear that T.A.'s find the processing of exercises, activities, and assignments one of their most challenging, and, perhaps, most perplexing tasks. As an evaluator of their teaching, it is clear

that it is in these less structured, more spontaneous situations that effective teaching is often best revealed. But it is easier for them to let the exercise or activity progress until no time remains for processing. In other cases, they find discussing the issues and arguments revealed or stimulated in the exercise easier than analyzing the process. When specific, exercise-or activity-related questions are provided, the overall quality of the processing improves, the use of class time is more efficient, and the amount of focusing on important communication concepts and principles increases. If exercises and activities are not related to communication concepts and principles, not only might their purpose be misunderstood but the whole course might be considered "fun and games."

4. It reminds teachers of the readings students are doing; T.A.'s can encourage them by putting the readings on the blackboard or briefly reviewing them.

- 5. It suggests other possible activities that can be used as supplements; it also suggests some alternatives that can be considered.
 - 6. It offers suggestions for personalizing the course.
- 7. It also provides spaces for the T.A.'s to add their own comments and suggestions regarding the way the exercises and activities are handled in the training sessions or the way class periods progress. They are also encouraged to record recommendations for further improvement.

Armed with this material, and having accepted the challenge to raise questions and ask for clarification where needed, T.A.'s come to campus several days before classes begin. At some institutions, graduates enroll in a class for which credit is given; at others, students are paid for their participation in an organized and in-depth training session. At powling Green, all graduate students are required to participate in university-wide "Professional Develop-

ment Program" (PDP). The purpose of this program is teacher improvment on a broad scale. As part of the PDP, students have a teaching unit or lesson video-taped. Video-taping is an important part of teacher training. They are provided with instructions on lecturing and leading discussions. They also engage in discussions with T.A.'s who are experienced in teaching in their discipline. Integrated with this program, each department or college runs its own training sessions. Within the School of Speech Communication, the director of each of the multi-sectioned courses is responsible for that training.

Because T.A.'s at Bowling Green are offered a broad look at teaching through the PDP, because they need specific information about what they are to do when they enter the classroom, and because there are only two or three days to prepare, we choose to put the teaching assistants in the role of student and have them participate in the activities they will soon direct. After each exercise or activity, it is discussed, the rationale for its inclusion in the course is presented, and various approaches to it or means of presenting it are offered. Experienced teaching assistants (one's who have previously taught in the basic course) attend these sessions, help fun the exercises and activities, and contribute their impressions, discuss their problems, and suggest alternatives and approaches.

The basic-communication course begins with interpersonal exercises, thus, the training sessions begin with interpersonal exercises. About thirty to thirty-five T.A.'s are involved in this initial training. The by-products of these training sessions are precisely those encouraged in the communication classroom:

- 1. Participants become acquainted with each other.
- 2. Interaction and communication are initiated.
- 3. A communication spirit or environment is established.

Radio-Television-Film, Communication Disorders, Communication Education, and Interpersonal and Public Communication) get together, share ideas, and establish friendships.

Perhaps the major function of these opening exercises is that they help alleviate fear. Most of those T.A.'s in training have never taught before.

Just as a case can be made for using interpersonal exercises prior to a public-communication unit to help relax students, a case can be made for using them to serve the same function prior to in-class teaching. They help T.A.'s feel comfortable and poised--ready. They also provide how-to-do-it information they can use the next week. This appears to be a common concern of T.A.'s.⁵

As the quarter begins, the third fourth, and fifth prongs begin. Weekly staff meetings are started. These are designed to be a continuation of the initial sessions as well as an opportunity to present and discuss common problems. Since T.A.'s are now in the classroom teaching, they confront many problems and questions that are a product of their new situation.

The training sessions and weekly, staff meetings also provide a model of the expectations held for T.A. effectiveness in the classroom. If the director of the program is unable to fulfill characteristics of effective teaching, how can the T.A.'s be expected to fulfill them? "Do as I say and not as I'do," is an ineffective and counterproductive aphorism for effective training in such situations. The characteristics consistently identified by students as comprising effective teaching, and those, too, that should help guide the director, are:

- 1. clarity of organization, interpretation, and explanation
- encouragement of class discussion and the presentation of diverse points of view
- 3. stimulation of students' interests, motivation, and thinking

5. manifestation of enthusiasm

These are characteristics we establish as important for the basic-communication course; thus, they should be visible and active in each of the training sessions and staff meetings. Weekly staff meetings continue throughout the quarter.

One other part of the training sessions that has proven valuable is the practice in critiquing and analyzing speeches. Since public speaking is fully one-third of the course, T.A.'s must become comfortable in evaluating such efforts. Our attempt in having T.A.'s evaluate live or video-taped speeches is threefold:

- 1. It prepares them by providing a variety of approaches to and styles of analysis.
- 2. It gives them a variety of questions that could be asked. It suggests the important concepts and principles and which ones deserve the most emphasis.
- 3. Finally, it gives them some idea of the standards to be used in assigning grades.

Our intent is not to make everyone's standards the same. Even if we could, we would not want to. We hope to bring those whose evaluations are extremely lenient and those whose evaluations are very conservative in toward some agreed, upon mean. With 30-35 T.A.'s judging what some would label a high "C" speech, the early grade range might vary from a "D" to an "A." Practice, discussion, and comparison of grades helps to get all T.A.'s operating from a more-common base. The advantage of video-taped speeches is, of course, that they can be replayed. In this way, more effective listening is encouraged through the outlining and explication of specific criteria. We have found this to be one area where widely divergent approaches and standards are revealed. We prefer to err on the side of spending too much time on this function.

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Once teachers become more comfortable in their classroom, and once the adjustment to graduate life becomes easier and more relaxed, the fourth prong of teacher training is initiated: in-class visitations. Because the philosophy and approach for this prong have been provided elsewhere, only the main purposes will be offered here:

- 1. to provide follow-up observations regarding the implementation of ideas and activities
- 2. to evaluate teaching skills
- 3. to provide guidelines for improvement
- 4. to let graduate students know that effective teaching is important 8

Although a response-form check sheet with specific criteria is used for the observation, it allows, too, for extensive open-ended responses. What the observer wants to determine is whether or not T.A.'s have developed CARE: Communicated Authenticity, Regard for the other person which is positive, and Empathy, and if it is not revealed, to help them develop it. If follow-up conferences, conversations, or visitations are necessary, they are pursued. This has, in general, been one of the strongest aspects of the training program. Although nobody really likes to have a person in a superior position observing his or her teaching, most concede that it is helpful. The threat can be diminished if its purpose is presented as an observation-suggestion one as opposed to an evaluative one. People, in general, do not like to be evaluated.

The visitation program is an automatic, inherent, and expected part of the basic-course program. In the five years that it has been used, there have been no objections or complaints. The visitations are unannounced. Second visits are made to the classes of both high-quality and low-quality instructors; thus, a second visit is not an indication of weakness or failure.

Another part of the visitation program can include having new teachers visiting experienced colleagues. For two years at Bowling Green, we had all teachers visiting each other. Although worthwhile, it becomes an administrative hassle to make certain everyone is visiting, that all have a chance to see a variety of styles and approaches, and to make certain no one feels threatened, harassed, or infringed upon. We did not allow T.A.'s full freedom in whom they wished to visit. It was eminently clear that some T.A.'s would have been teaching with a gallery of visitors while others would have no one.

For all assistants in the basic course, a coordinate one-hour pedagogy course, the fifth prong, is required. In the past, this course has had as one of its requirements, a project tailor-made for the basic-course teaching experience. Some of the projects included:

- 1. designing an activity or exercise
- 2. discovering and justifying a supplementary reading
- 3. creating and defending an evaluation (critique) form
- 4. devising examination questions

The projects change each quarter. For those who get no other specific classroom pedagogy training—besides the training sessions and weekly staff meetings—they are involved in a minimal effort that gets them thinking and working in a pedagogical vein. This project assignment has also provided the program with many additional pieces of information and kinds of material that have been helpful in updating both the approach and the content of the course.

The final prong of the teacher-training effort has been voluntary. It is a four-unit course titled "Teaching Interpersonal and Public Communication."

It is not unlike other such courses, 11 however, one basic underlying philosophy guides the overall effort: the skilled and effective teacher is the one who can bring the largest amount and highest quality of materials to bear on the course.



The course is built upon exposure. Rather than train teachers to implement an exercise, to critique an effort, to support an approach, to defend a philosophy, or find the way, they must learn to find resources. The important thing is not necessarily the specifics at the time a course is offered-especially since the specifics are always changing-but knowing where to find material and how to enjoy the quest are far more important. If students are not only excited about teaching, but excited about trying out new ideas, they will take the responsibility for plugging in new, exciting content into courses. What teachers need are a variety of formats into which information can be plugged. In this course, we talk about a variety of approaches to education, to teaching, and to interpersonal and public-communication. These approaches are reflected in the kinds of reading material required for the course:

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, <u>Teaching As a Subversive Activity</u>
(New York: Delacorte Press, 1969).

Ohmer Milton and Associates, On College Teaching (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1978).

Wilbert J. McKeachie, <u>Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning</u>

<u>College Teacher</u>, Seventh Edition (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1978).

Ken Macrorie, <u>Uptaught</u> (New York: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1970).

I would also recommend several other sources I have used for the course:

Kenneth E. Eble, The Craft of Teaching (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977).

Robert C. Hawley and Isabel L. Hawley, <u>Human Values in the Classroom: A</u> Handbook for Teachers (New York: Hart Publishing Company, Inc., 1975).

Robin Higham, The Compleat Academic: An Informal Guide to the Ivory

Tower (New York: St. Martin's, 1974).

Into the parameters and categories offered in these sources; we plug interpersonal and public-communication material. That is, we let the above authors raise some of the issues, and then we adapt those issues to the speech-communication classroom. In that way, we train the T.A. broadly, knowing that the methods and approaches will have applicability no matter the content area. The question becomes, how likely is it that these students will be teaching the course they begin teaching five years from now? Another similar question could be asked as well: How likely is it that these students will be teaching the course they begin teaching in the same way five years from now? Students, it seems, are either not trained at all, or are trained to teach a course they never teach. To minimize frustration, build a solid teaching base, and, thus, to maximize effectiveness, we teach teachers to teach using interpersonal and public communication as a focal point for discussion but within the educational or teaching-techniques rubric.

The final class project is designed to provide more depth in a particular area of specialty that relates to the topic of the course. The expectation is for students to research, develop, and then write a publishable pedagogical article. Guidance is given throughout the development of the material. The article is even submitted twice: once for thorough editorial comments and suggestions and the second time for the grade. This assignment also calls attention to the relationship between teaching and research. The quality of the efforts vary; however, the course has resulted in several published pieces, two convention papers, and a thesis.

A by-product of these six prongs is another important part of T.A. training that must not be slighted; indeed, it must be encouraged. It could even be
considered a seventh prong, although it is unstructured and informal for the
most part. It is the social environment: the informal give-and-take that occurs



between T.A.'s. Although we know it happens, although we know it is important, and although we realize that, perhaps, more actual learning occurs in this environment than in any we formally organize, how much do we do to encourage it? There are several ways to encourage a healthy social environment:

- 1. Office space can be arranged to facilitate interaction. T.A.'s with similar assignments can be located to gether or in adjoining offices.
- 2. Social events such as parties and get-togethers can be arranged. Generally, the T.A.'s themselves take care of this function.
- 3. Eating times can be planned so that some T.A. have certain times open for brown-bag lunch-discussions.
- 4. Lounge areas can be provided with snack and coffee machines nearby where T.A.'s can gather between classes.
- 5. Informal faculty-T.A. discussions can be planned for the discussion of issues pertinent to them. Some of these issues might include:
 - a. writing resumes
 - b. interviewing for jobs
 - c. writing, publishing, and presenting convention papers
 - d. consulting.
 - e. time management
 - f. balancing writing, teaching, and service within the profession
 - g. how to adapt to a new teaching environment

The point of this article has been to indicate that teaching-assistant training must involve more than a single-pronged approach. Although each prong is important, just providing materials and texts, pre-service training, weekly staff meetings, in-class visitations, a one-hour pedagogy course, an optional four-credit teaching course, or even a proper, supportive, social climate, is not enough. The results we try to achieve at Bowling Green State University:

(1) breadth of exposure, (2) variety of experiences, and (3) involvement in activity (the actual teaching) comes from the effect of the total effort, not necessarily from a single aspect of it. We cannot always control how deeply immersed T.A.'s become in the total effort; however, we try to make certain that in those areas where they must be involved, their experience is broad and meaningful. The approach is expansive and diverse, but the results appear to be specific and effective. It helps teachers to believe in themselves: that they are good teachers and that they are committed to, and believe in, finding new ways to improve their teaching skills. Our goal is interested, competent, and highly-motivated teachers.

Pootnotes

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See Sara Stelzner, untitled paper on the University of Massachusetts'

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⁸ Weaver, "The Quest," p. 1.

⁹ See Weaver, "The Quest," pp. 15-16, for a sample of the response form.

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